

# Studies offer mixed messages on social media's effects on young people

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Photo by: MCT

Dr. Drew Pate is an expert on the mental and emotional health of adolescents. Whenever he counsels patients or speaks to parenting groups, one question always arises: Is social media bad for teenagers?

Parents wonder if their children's constant use of Instagram, Facebook or Snapchat is healthy. Teenagers talk about the pressure to post the perfect photo or compete with the perfect lives their peers present on the Internet.

"When you talk to parents and see kids in the office, we hear more and more about the potential damage being caused by social media," said Dr. Pate. "I think almost any adolescent who is involved in any social media has probably had some negative effect from it."

## **Excessive Social Media Use**

Researchers and scientists are still trying to figure out how social media use affects young people. So far the evidence is mixed and there is no broad agreement on the long-term consequences of excessive social media use.

Studies have shown the around-the-clock world of social media takes a mental and emotional toll on some young people. It has been linked to increased anxiety, depression and decreased relationship skills. One study found social media can be more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol for some people.

Social media also can have a positive effect, however. Some research has found that social media can be a useful resource for teens. It can help them find social support when they are struggling with life issues, and it can provide them with a place where they can express themselves. Some teens are able to build friendships and relationships through the interaction they have with others on the Internet.

## **Negative Mental Effects Of Social Media**

One study published earlier this year by the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine cast social media in a decidedly negative light. It found that the more time young adults spend on social media, the more likely they are to become depressed and have problems sleeping.

Another study by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that depression had increased dramatically among teens, particularly among girls. The authors believe cyberbullying may be playing a role.

At American University, researchers found a link between social media use and negative body image, which can lead to eating disorders. A recent survey of young people conducted by the Royal Society for Public Health in London suggests that Instagram and Snapchat are the most likely to cause body-image problems. Young women, in particular, are bombarded with edited images that mask people's flaws and imperfections.

"This practice is contributing to a generation of young people with body image and body confidence issues," the report said.

## **Teens Easily Affected By What Others Say Online**

Teenagers are already self-conscious and easily affected by what others say, said Dr. Pate. They may start comparing their lives to those of people on social media. They may think comments people make on social media are directed at them when they are not, or they may misinterpret what someone says, in part because online interactions lack such social cues as tone of voice or facial expression.

Some experts believe excessive social media use should be designated formally as an addiction.

"The more rapid and the more image-loaded it is, the quicker and the greater the chance of an addiction," said Dr. Bankole Johnson, of the University of Maryland. "If you were gambling and you increase your frequency of gambling, the greater becomes the chance of becoming addicted to gambling."

## **Studying The Benefits Of Social Media**

However, some experts warn against seeing the effects of social media in purely negative terms. They point to studies that have found beneficial effects.

One study found that social media helps teenagers who play video games excessively and suffer from symptoms of depression. Heavy gamers who have a network of friends on social media seem to do better than those who play the games a lot and don't have similar social networks. They "play a lot but don't necessarily have problems with video game addiction, depression or anxiety," said researcher Michelle Colder Carras.

Carras said that care needs to be taken when making a direct link between mental health and social media use. She said the survey by the Royal Society for Public Health doesn't show that the social media caused anxiety and other issues. It didn't ask whether the teenagers already had mental health problems or if those problems could have been linked to something else.

The Royal Society lists several proposals for easing the ill effects of social media on the emotional health of teenagers. Sites like Instagram could highlight when people have digitally altered their image or post warnings about the dangers of too much social media use, the group said. It also suggested that schools teach safe social-media use.

## **Limiting The Use Of Social Media**

Dr. Johnson said social media-related emotional problems in teenagers are often detected when they have other problems, such as learning and behavioral difficulties.

Some teenagers might need to be weaned off social media completely if it is causing intense emotional issues, Pate said.

Others might need regulated or tightened security measures so they are only socializing with a select group of people. Parents can help by monitoring online activity and limiting the amount of time their children spend on social media.

"It boils down to what the kids can manage and handle when it comes to the stress created by these sites," Dr. Pate said. "We want the kids to individualize their own approach."